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What is Actuality?

A study about directing in documentaries based
on my filming-stay in West Africa –The Gambia

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(要約)

事実と事実性の違いに対峙することは、ドキュメンタリーを制作する上で不可避な問題の渦中にいることを再確認することである。事実を取材し、事実を記録するものがドキュメンタリーの定義と言われ久しい。しかし、事実を取材し、その事実は事実性とともに記録される。そこに、ドキュメンタリーの演出が存在する。

この小論文は、日本から見て、極西に位置するアフリカ最小国のガンビアを取材撮影し、絶対的事実の存在を探究するとともに、視点が求める被写体にカメラを向ける瞬間から始まる演出の行為を、自身の研究テーマであるドキュメンタリーの事実と演出との関係の中で帰納的考察を試みた、ひとつの記録である。

1 Introduction

In the 170 years since the invention of still photography, visual media technologies have been rapidly developed. It can be said that its rapid development has formed an image oriented society, which is inevitably influenced by complex networks of visual media. The scope of mass media has been increased to not only show impressive visual information, but also to meet the viewers changing interest in new technical media which allows them to also become broadcasters. As a result, the evolution of visual communication has been widely popularized in society, and the relationship between media and viewers has been comprehensively transformed. I have been studying this transformation in terms of structural issues in visual media as well as in terms of viewers' psychological attitudes, and these studies have formed a significant part of the basis of my production.

I analyze my production with regard to television, which is perhaps the most familiar visual media in modern image oriented society, in terms of critical media studies. And I would like to continue with a more detailed analysis of the production, in particular, in relation to television, while still basing my thoughts on the original aims of the production.

2 Television and the Production

As Raymond Williams indicates (1990), there is a potential manipulation in television programmes either intentional or unintentional. This is one of the main focuses in my analysis; the purpose is to observe the disparity between directed realities and actual realities. We might realise there are inevitable political interventions in television information and we, the viewers, have probably been prevented from examining the situation clearly due

to the rapid editing and repetition of visual information. As a result, we tend to believe that the visual realities as directed by a television scenario are actual realities.

As a viewer of television, it is quite likely that I, too, have been disinformed by such directing techniques and I might have mistaken a directed reality for an actual reality; however, I have been studying the context of this type of programme direction, I decided to take action and to visit The Gambia and produce a programme portraying actual West African reality, which was based on my original aims to study the principles of visual communication. I preferred to visit the field where there are many realities which remain unknown and therefore, I chose The Gambia. After completion, I thought it was the best place to have observed the disparities between mediated realities and the actual realities existing in that country.

As mentioned previously, almost everyone is curious to learn about unknown realities existing not only in the same cultural areas as they live, but also in foreign cultures. However, even though such curiosity requires an actual experience, of the locality in which those unknown realities are taking place, it is almost always impossible and therefore, as Tatsuya Mori describes (2005), we watch television to satisfy this curiosity with selected visual images which are well-directed and full of impressions and persuasion. Most of us do not, however, tend to doubt the directed reality we often are exposed to, and if we regularly have such pseudo-experiences every day, as Bruce Cumings (2004) points out, it will be quite hard to comprehend the disparity between directed and actual reality in terms of critical media literacy.

The Dentsu Research White Paper states that (2006), a major change is occurring among viewers who watch television, with regards to their own viewing styles, especially that of the younger generation who tend to watch television on their personal computers or mobile phones. So, the possibility of creating new relationships between broadcasters and viewers, will be realized at a personal level first, hence, the fact that this production on The Gambia could be broadcast through such personal computers or mobile phones was part of my supposition.

According to a report presented by the Dentsu Research White Paper (2006), even though the circumstances surrounding television have gradually changed, viewers basically intend to watch television with a conventional receivers' attitude and they are not interested in the possibility of production directions in any programme, except in the case of an urgent message or breaking news. Moreover, because of the massive proliferation of media devices such as mobile phones and i-phones, as well as the technological advancements of personal computers, and the increase of internet news sites and video sites such as YouTube, television is compelled to keep developing itself to maintain its

wide audience and compete with these other powerful newer media sources. For example, from 2011 in Japan, all terrestrial broadcasting will become exclusively digital, which will open a slew of new channels and programming. As Mori (2005) insists in his book, the word 'broadcast' in its traditional sense has effectively died. He states that the conventional scenario where tens of millions or even hundreds of millions viewers watch the same television programme simultaneously will cease to exist and not be resurrected. Mori also predicts (2005) that almost all current mass media, be it print media, television, movies, or whatever else, might become what he terms 'my media'. Considering the steady proliferation of 'my media' type outlets already in worldwide use on the internet this attitude towards current mass media may be neither so surprising nor a particularly Japanese phenomenon. In such media circumstances, anybody can select their favourite media device, and access the images they desire, as well as upload information themselves. This in turn means viewers of a variety of media devices will be able to decide the channel as well as the time they would like to watch. Moreover, these developments seem to be further progressing due to the assumption that viewers enjoy interactivity. Consequently, there have already been some highly rated television programmes produced which were 'spin offs' of television type productions that were created in anonymous blogs. This is a supposition of awareness that all viewers of visual media might be able to function as an individual medium in a modern, image oriented society. On the other hand, television producers in turn, might have to become more and more aggressive in their directing techniques in order to confront this emerging new age of media.

I was impressed to learn that, Mr. Tetsuya Chikushi, nationally famous in Japan and an extremely experienced commercial news programme anchor, remarked in his programme 2007 as follows: "Some viewers are quite subtle an part of a great anonymous mass, and we are just seen from a distance". Mr. Chikushi was considering both the physical and psychological distance between television personalities and viewers and I believe he was saying that he and television programmes are not viewed, but are very likely just looked at through a studio camera lens quietly, without knowing any viewers' reactions. Therefore, viewers have high expectations concerning new media forms which offer greater interactivity, but still consider the existence of television as a culturally indispensable device. As Cumings says (2004), we can assume it is likely that television companies welcome such viewers' attitudes.

(a) Actuality and Visual Image

I had always thought that actuality—factual information so to speak—was the most valuable visual material to present when producing a documentary, but I noticed that my idea about that has

undergone a transformation during this filming and editing process. I began this project by first considering it was not the correct way to have any preconceived distinction between visual image and actuality, or subjectivity and objectivity, when I portrayed the lifestyle and the cultural actualities of The Gambia. During my research, I firmly believed that an unknown actuality had an absolute value that could be communicated through visual media. Though it is clear that my idea of actuality has not changed, I began to feel that just recording the mere existence of and everyday activities of the people might not produce any acceptable documentary sequences. As Michael Rabiger suggests (1998), I realized that without coordinated directional insights on my part, a viable, coherent documentary would be impossible to produce. Furthermore, without filmmaking direction and detailed organization, the very topics and issues that I wished to impart to my audience would have been lost. For example, one of the aims of the film was to show the viewers that polygamy is an entirely normal and integral part of Gambian society, and in fact, in much of the world, and therefore, whatever we think of polygamy, we are viewing this phenomenon through our own cultural values. When producing an anthropological documentary, in order to be as fair and objective as possible, as Makoto Sato says (2001), the filmmaker must not have unnecessary prejudice or preconceived value judgments. However, as Mori describes (2005), the documentary filmmaker cannot help but exert his or her own subjectivity on the work; the key is to keep one's own subjectivity in balance with the objective actuality, which hopefully will produce the most interesting storyline. Moreover, it should be filmed as discretely and unobtrusively as possible. Rabiger notes (1998); good relations and full consent of those being filmed is essential. Therefore, although it became evident during filming that presenting an absolutely raw, untouched actuality would be impossible, it is never-the-less imperative to make the production in the spirit of the cultural actuality one is filming.

During interviews with Gambian wives and their husbands together, no method worked exceptionally well to extract the opinions and feelings of the interviewees which I felt the viewers would like to hear. The husbands, in particular, were unable to be open and give comprehensive answers. Consequently, as a last measure to make their actualities understandable, I decided to employ the use of an oral narration, which was indeed good for expressing abstract matters. Then, I considered that the narration had to insert inferences to give the actuality an understandable meaning for the whole of the situation, but as Cumings says (2004), I could regard the methodology itself as being manipulative or as being a directing technique used quite generally in television. Whenever I faced the numerous unknown actualities in The Gambia, it was nearly impossible to define the difference between a

subjective viewpoint and an objective viewpoint. Certainly I could feel disparities between actual realities and directed realities when I was filming on location, but then, once the visual images were edited, it was hard to visually notice the disparity anymore. It could be said that the disparities actually existed, but the method of how to convey a content created by the disparity itself could be manipulated by the diverse viewpoints of producers. Realistically speaking, as Cumings (2004) as well as Mori (2005) indicate that, we can infer that the disparities would be regarded to exist invisibly, and it is hard to visualize them within the circumstances of television; furthermore, the interpretation of the disparities depends very much on the viewer's individual insight. Mori also states (2005) that, it is a commonly held belief that the foundation of any documentary is based on the subjectivity of the producer, and I basically approve of his idea but I actually needed the objectivity of camera's eye because I knew that the camera sometimes could obtain an unexpectedly more desirable shot than what I would have achieved if I had relied only on my own subjectivity. Subsequently, I tried to consider the idea that a combination of both subjectivity and objectivity could unconsciously obtain nuances in visual images whenever I had to film actualities in Kuntaur village.

Cumings describes (2004) that, logical positivism is a concept which pursues a logical conclusion based on a fragment of experience, and it is often used to give meaning to an era, through the analysis of fragmentary documentation or to verify historical evidence in television programmes. Let's take the intriguingly suspicious incident of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. The incident occurred 45 years ago and a one hour television programme was produced and broadcast in prime time this February 21st, the title of which was "Facts of President John F. Kennedy's assassination 45 years ago". It is surprising that such a historical reality still could be the basis for a one-hour television programme broadcast in prime time in Japan. As a matter of fact, this kind of programme, which guides the viewers like private detectives to inspect the scene and review proven rational facts, can still achieve a good audience rating. It is not certain that this is a specifically Japanese tendency, but the programme introduced the fact that there are still many private researchers and that they are continuing to examine the evidence. Undoubtedly the programme guided viewers to think that there appeared to be many differing realities in the incident, by introducing, for example, the verbal evidence presented by a female witness who was just 10 years old at the time, a researcher's testimony proven in terms of scientific studies, and the live testimony of a man who called himself the assassin in this incident. Still, those documentations did not seem to reach any where near a certain and indisputable truth. Cumings states (2004) according to logical positivism that, there might be

two methods to verify a new factor, the first being to object to existing assumptions, and the second to object to the deductions. It can again be recognized that actualities which have been accepted by the public are not always actual, and then revisiting them, they appear more mysterious to viewers. Therefore, this kind of television programme will survive as these “mysteries”, as well as incompatible accumulated actualities, are indispensable in producing serial television programmes.

What I could learn from this programme on President Kennedy with reference to the Gambian production, is that there is a possibility that viewers in a distant future will object to the incompatibility of my partially directed documentation of Gambian actuality, because through their later perspective, Gambian actuality may have a developed different character. That means that “Zeitgeist” may not only change a human’s sense of understanding actualities, but also their attitude toward visual media. As Sato indicates (2001) the incompatibilities themselves should be recorded in a form of a documentary, to develop the research and studies of actualities and their contexts in terms of historical, cultural, and critical media literacy. However, generally most viewers remain disinterested in this aspect of documenting actuality, are less concerned with the relative objectivity of mediated actuality. It is my belief that witnessed actualities should be recorded in archives, to be put to practical use whenever the present will be referred to as the past.

(b) Visual Images in Television

Cumings states (2004) that many discussions related to image biases are repeatedly conducted not only within television but also in public forums, yet it seems that television is only functioning in its current technological role to produce selected information that will result in increased audience ratings. Certainly, when visual images of Africa are broadcast in Japan, they do not show the city of Nairobi in Kenya; the average Japanese viewer never would imagine such a modern capital city exists in Africa. The Dakar Rally, a car race between Paris and Dakar in Senegal, is very popular and famous, but television coverage only follows certain drivers’ actions rather than considering that this is an interesting chance to show unfamiliar cultural actualities in Africa. This omission is, according to Mori’s statement (2005), because television companies know that images showing modernized African areas that are similar to those in Japan, will not interest the viewers. In such a case, visual images other than safaris or a scene in a desert, will instead tend to be ones of Paris, selected purely to meet the viewers’ expectations.

As Shin Mizukoshi describes (2002), though it seems that it is getting more difficult for television stations to satisfy viewers, I

think some of the difficulty is based on the increased awareness among viewers, of potential biases and this seems very important for not only the broadcasters, but for the viewers as well. This awareness might become a consciousness, able to verify the possibility of invisible bias in the process of visual image production. At the same time, as Cumings indicates (2004), television stations still possess the firm possibility of depriving their viewers of their awareness because they still can make things in private or public, as well as having realities and fiction mixed, and rapidly presented, then broadcast continuously, so as not to have any “mistakes” such as creating a vacant time slot. Mizukoshi continues (2002) that, ironically, the particular nature of television that is its immediacy, is supported by viewers. Therefore, it seems unlikely that viewers with interactive network-media such as internet, i-phone, and YouTube will be able to challenge the overwhelming immediacy and apparent credibility of television mass media. In other words, television companies are not interested in creating any deliberations or dialogues with viewers, rather the media tend to try to quickly win a market share against sharp competition. Cumings says (2004) that, although the modern television viewer has somewhat increased awareness of institutionalized mass media bias, the potential of the viewer to interpret televised visual images through the prism of directed actuality remains strong.

3 Cultural Studies and Documentaries

In particular, as Sato describes in his book ‘Rhetoric of Documentary’ (2006), when I capture actualities in an unknown community to produce an ethnographic documentary, it is necessary that I have to establish good relations with the community. Moreover, it is more significant that the filmmaker should be aware that targeting necessary objects by using a camera is in and of itself an interference in actualities (or the community’s daily life) and the start of the production direction. Sato insists that, ‘the proposition of producing documentaries is to meet others’ (2006). Therefore, in order to be able to get in near enough to point the camera at people and things at close range, the ability to effectively cope with any incongruous and tense situations is indispensable.

I think Kuntaur village in The Gambia can be called a treasure trove of unknown actualities. Even though there were plenty of cultural curiosities to film, it was very difficult to grasp the meaning of this unknown culture as a whole. It is quite difficult to visualize and then convey through visual media a shapeless cultural essence which could never be understood with a one-sided view. The difficulty of portraying this invisible content was more

significant than the editing techniques, so I had a hard time at the editing stage because of this problem. However, Rabiger indicates (1998) that what filmmakers should have here, is a problem of showing how a visible significance is more than a shapeless cultural essence, of showing it as a serious subtext. In the post-production stage, I used visual materials which showed several flat, old pieces of wood with the Koran written in Arabic on them. Then I tried to portray the Islamic atmosphere in the community. It is clear that not everyone who will watch this scene, will be able to understand these are symbols in an Islamic society. According to Yu M Lotman's statement (1977), they will be interpreted as mere drawings or marks without any meaning to the viewers if they have never seen anything like them before. Lotman continues (1977) that the generation of different interpretations of an image is based on many reasons. For example, differences of cultural background, education, conventions, religions, or even one's own personality. The same thing can be said about other visual media as photographs and paintings. We, the video producers, should notice such limitations or conditions of visual communication, otherwise our productions will face serious difficulties or failure. When I am asked what is an effective way to reduce the visual communication gap, I would answer verbal narration. As Susumu Okada described (1981), a relationship between an image and culture is much more complicated than a relationship between language and culture. So, verbal language is the only material to fill in the gap. Then viewers will interpret visuals accompanied with a narration based on their imagination, memories, and points of view.

My documentary is somewhat like a museum piece and the whole atmosphere is arranged in a pastoral way. There is mention of the historical background of West Africa accompanied by sound effects, and at another time I tried to express the cultural and geographical greatness of Africa by employing a verbal narration. With its multi-layered narration and sound, and visual images of the African land, this section resembles an old album. The reason that mood is created here is that there are no insertions of visual images or narration that surprise viewers. On the whole, I tried to contain in the documentary narration, a trigger to generate discussions about the African lifestyle, historical context, and polygamy, because the average Japanese viewers do not understand the African actual reality as an issue that has anything to do with them. Likewise, they do not recognize polygamy and its historical context correctly but it is very significant to try to study this legacy from the recorded past. Therefore, Rabiger admits (1998) that Frahertry's earlier documentary 'Nanook of the North (1922)' is acknowledged as the seminal work concerned with recording the vanishing of past cultures. A source of vitalizin interest in the past might be active discussion, controversies at an academic society,

and a sense of tension which still exists when the facts are debated. A discussion about polygamy, referring to statistics presented by Helen E Fisher (1993) as rare evidence of polygamy's popularization with 84% of unique socio-cultural forms in the world adopting it, will create a chance to think about human rights as well as the family composition again. Many Japanese viewers do not know the details of polygamy, therefore this is a good opportunity, when they watch my production, to compare it with monogamy, which Japanese society has adopted. Mizukoshi says (2002) that understanding the existence of diverse values on earth will be welcomed, hence it is necessary to reconsider if television could fulfil its fundamental role as an intellectual social device with a well-balanced sense of objectivity and subjectivity to communicate to viewers but also to reflect on what and how they communicate.

Conventional thinking says that television has transformed human perception into an image oriented form but I do not agree with that way of thinking; as James W. Carey attempted to criticise the technology centred media studies (1989), I rather think the opposite. In short, human demands are the basis for television's tendency to ingratiate themselves and so television companies are always trying to respond to human's desires or requests as fast as possible. However, current viewers are not interested in the conventional television production, as they actually select their favourite images and favourite outputs from the overflow of visual information, and consume them passively.

As Sato says (2001) that both the broadcasters and the viewers tend to believe that what the camera sees is better than what is taken in by the human eye, in other words, the mind's eye. However, sometimes I encounter beauty captured by a camera that is more beautiful than the actual object. This tendency should not exist as it is clear that the mind's eye is the most direct contact to actuality. Only in my mind's eye I could see the beginning of this Gambian production, and could go along with the many decisions to compromise, change, persist, and to finish the production. The mind's eye has an intimate relationship between human memories and perception, therefore, as Sato continues (2001), making the mind's eye congenial to an inorganic camera eye is essential.

Again, it can be asserted that the camera can deceive. As I already described above, if an actuality in visual media is directed, and if we believe the directed actuality without any critical consideration, we will be easily misled by television journalism. As Raymond Williams describes (1990), television information is politically and commercially selected; we know it is absolutely impossible to see every incident taking place all over the world, therefore we watch television instead of witnessing incidents on location in person. We already notice several biases in visual media so we have to understand the structural meaning of actualities by ourselves in terms of media literacy. Unless we try to determine the real

meaning of a visual media object by ourselves, we have to remain just blind believers in television commentaries.

4 Conclusion

I would like to reconfirm my original aims which led this production to completion. The aims were to try to demonstrate: (1) a realistic indispensability of production directions to generate disparities between actual realities and directed realities based on documentary's range of forms, as well as the responsibility of documentary to be fair, and then to explore: (2) the answer of 'what is actuality?' in terms of critical television media literacy.

There were certainly many almost incomprehensible actual realities in The Gambia. My consideration about the disparity contained a sense of distance, too. The difference in distances between The Gambia and Europe and that between The Gambia and Japan was significant, and it had a great influence on interpretations of the unknown Gambian actualities; this could be proven by geographical, historical, religious, and cultural points of view. My production could generate diverse interpretations about realities based on my consistent standpoint, the diversity based on my doubts about television which have been previously analyzed.

During the production, I thought that verbal narration was one of the most effective structuring methods and I attached special importance to verbal narration to eliminate any misunderstandings that may develop by just using visual images. The narration was conducted in English, not my mother tongue, so this could cause some nuances in the interpretation of actualities and their meanings but, with English being the second most common language, it was the only language which could enable the reduction of translation mistakes.

When I evaluate the completed work, I could analyze that this "Life in The Gambia - Polygamy" production, to at least some extent achieved its aims. At least, the challenge to act as an individual medium (myself) was successful, however there were many unexpected incidents which compelled me to recognize the limitation of my individual efforts. Another challenge was to observe the existence of disparities between electronically recorded actualities and feelings based on real experiences in Africa, was also achieved, but my doubt about my production, which introduces a rare and an unknown subject matter to viewers, was certainly more realistically developed than my expectation. This doubt itself, however, should be the most important aspect of my production. If I analyze the reason why I was able to overcome those challenges to some extent, I have to say that I, from the first stage, assumed that I would produce the work for broadcast on television or other visual media such as personal computers or

mobile phones, which are the most familiar media in our daily lives. Therefore, it should be clearly analyzed as to whether the production is consequently manipulated to suit such current visual image media under the influence of television journalism.

Also, I could say that I tried to demonstrate, based on my own visual sense in this production, the disparities in relationships between directed realities and actual realities. It was clear to me that these disparities have always existed almost unnoticed in conventional mass media. The way social visual technology has developed, has transformed the relationship between visual image makers and viewers into a more intimate one. It has also enabled me to re-recognize the critical limitations of visual communication. This recognition is based on the diverse viewpoints of all humans as both visual image makers as well as visual image recipients. The limitations themselves were made clear by the diverse senses of direction, which were of subjectivities, and shapeless spiritual complexities. Ironically, all of such diversities were thought to be indispensable factors to enrich visual communication, however, nobody can deny that visual media, especially television, will be further developed and expand the necessity of being an indispensable social device to create new possibilities to make visual communication more worthy of being viewed, rather than just being looked at from a far.

Lastly, I think that the problems involved in the completion of the production entitled 'Life in The Gambia'- Polygamy, taught me about the increasing limitations, along with the curious incomprehensibility, of visual communication, and on the other hand, about recognizing a vast potential well beyond my imagination.

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